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Tribune exclusive report/Online harassment among teens

Teenage taunting goes high-tech: Cyberbullies

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The Tribune

Maybe the insults started because he was the new kid, or because he doesn't like rowdy weekend parties.

Or maybe it was because he enjoys going to class at Arroyo Grande High School; he likes spending time with his teachers and excels in his college prep courses including biology, drama and Spanish.

The attacks were written online, on a Web site that allowed the authors a comfortable anonymity while they hurled slurs at a peer some would later admit they didn't know well.

The teen, whom The Tribune is not naming to protect his privacy, is one of millions of young people across the country who have been "cyberbullied," estimates Carlsbad-based i-SAFE America, a nonprofit group that educates parents and youth about Internet responsibility.

Locally, few incidents have been reported, and so there are no concrete numbers as to how many San Luis Obispo County students have been bullied online.

But the trend is quickly rising in the United States and worldwide, according to i-SAFE, as teenagers' use of the Internet has escalated and made global connections a mouse click away.

The potential damage from an instant message or an e-mail, typed in minutes, can be permanent: in Vermont, a teen suicide has been traced back to online incidents. And local school administrators are just forming plans to deal with cyberbullying, particularly with the difficult problem of handling things students do from their home computers.

Often, teens' online chattering is harmless -- details about weekend plans, school and vacations fill chat rooms and instant messages.

But with increasing frequency, the talk turns personal and attacks other students for their appearance, ethnicity or religious beliefs. That's according to the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use, a Eugene, Ore.-based group that promotes responsible Internet use to youth.

Sometimes students send cruel comments via their cell phones or e-mail accounts, or exclude a classmate from an online chat group, the center said. Sometimes they take pictures of classmates at school with the cameras on their cell phones, post the photos online and ask others to rate them.

Arroyo teen harassed

They called the Arroyo Grande teen stupid and annoying, a suck-up to his teachers and a mama's boy. One female classmate wrote that she couldn't understand how his girlfriend managed to kiss him -- she wouldn't touch him with a 10-foot pole.

The target of their aggression was a 15-year-old sophomore at Arroyo Grande High School who is handy with computers and other high-tech gadgets. He likes to eat hamburgers and French fries after school. He has a steady girlfriend. He's tried surfing a few times, balancing on a longboard in the waves at Pismo Beach.

It could have been anyone.

A survey by i-SAFE America of 1,500 American students last year found that 42 percent of them have been bullied online and 38 percent have been threatened online. Those numbers are projected to grow as young people become more and

more Internet savvy.

"If you're getting bullied on the playground, officials can break that up," said Erica Carlson, an i-SAFE spokeswoman. "On the Internet they (students) can post things and remain anonymous."

Sometimes, their comments have led to disastrous consequences.

In Essex Junction, Vt., a 13-year-old student committed suicide nearly two years ago; his father later found out he was harassed online, according to The Burlington (Vt.) Free Press.

"Tonight's the night," he wrote online just before hanging himself.

"It's about time," his tormenters wrote back.

In Baton Rouge, La., CBS-affiliate WAFB reported that two high school students were arrested for posting violent poems online threatening the school's "preps."

There are lesser, but still important, impacts as well, such as depression, low self-esteem, anxiety and anger, according to the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use.

Experts there say the psychological harm inflicted by cyberbullying may be even greater than face-to-face bullying, because there is nowhere for the victim to escape, and the hurtful information is potentially available to millions of Internet users.

Like victims of traditional bullying, students may also fear that if they tell on their attackers, they may be ostracized or bullied even more.

Linda Lewis Griffith, a San Luis Obispo marriage and family therapist, recommends that teens being bullied stand up to their tormenters.

"I'm not advocating hitting and stuff like that, but there's a time when you'd say 'Fight back; don't be victimized,'" she said.

If the bullying moves offline and becomes confrontational, she said students should retaliate with words, not fists.

Teens should "recognize that it's not their fault, that somebody else has the problem," she said.

How the 15-year-old Arroyo Grande student responds to the bullying depends on how he's feeling that day, said his mother, Michelle. The Tribune is withholding her last name to protect her and her son's privacy.

"He ignores them, or sometimes he'll flip them off or walk away," Michelle said. "Most of the time he ignores them."

Some of the teens who bullied the student later told the Arroyo Grande High principal they didn't know him well. A couple wrote contrite letters, insisting they don't hate him or think he's stupid.

But apologies haven't made the problem go away, Michelle said. Last week while riding the bus home, someone pulled the boy's Hurley cap off his head and spit in it. Other students threw small, hard objects that pelted him; he thinks they were coins.

Ganging up online

At one point, nearly 40 Arroyo Grande High School students were members of an online group through www.myspace.com, where they created profiles, logged in and posted comments about their 15-year-old peer.

Ryan Pinkerton, the principal at Arroyo Grande High, said he's talked to several of the students involved, and he's called every parent of the students who were members of the group. He declined to give the names of those students.

"Some of the parents were crushed," he said. But "most of the kids, when you call them in, say 'What's the big deal?' Half of them think it's just a joke. Most of the kids don't even know who he (the 15-year-old student) is."

Pinkerton wrote about the www.myspace.com site in his May newsletter to parents. In an earlier interview, he said he's worried about the personal information some students are posting online, as well as blatant references to drugs, alcohol and sex.

"It's amazing what these kids are saying on the Internet," he said. "With the Internet they don't feel like it's a big deal; they're a lot more willing to say and do things on the Internet they wouldn't otherwise. Some of these kids are putting their full names on it and where they live."

Officials at Los Angeles-based MySpace.com did not return e-mails seeking comment about the site.

What the school can do

The site was blocked from school computers at Arroyo Grande High last year once administrators realized that things were being posted about students.

If a student was bullied or threatened online at school, then administrators could take disciplinary action such as suspension or expulsion.

However, there are few ways for administrators to regulate such sites if postings don't happen on school property or with school computers.

Pinkerton didn't discipline any of the Arroyo Grande High School students who participated in the myspace.com group because their actions had taken place at home.

Pinkerton hasn't had to deal with similar problems. But then, he said, he doesn't have time to monitor Web sites, searching for students' potentially hurtful comments.

And few incidents -- such as what happened to the Arroyo Grande High student -- are reported, perhaps because the teens don't know they're being targeted online.

For example, the 15-year-old might never have known that classmates were writing nasty things about him had his girlfriend not brought the site to his attention.

There are similar, but less personal, groups on myspace.com as well; for example, 167 students joined a group called "AGHS (expletive) sucks!"

But cyberbullying is such a new trend that many districts in San Luis Obispo County are just beginning to broaden their disciplinary measures to include incidents that happen over the Internet or through cell phones.

The districts have introduced different ways to deal with cyberbullying -- at San Luis Obispo High School, for example, students are not allowed to access personal e-mail accounts from campus computers, said Principal Will Jones.

But unless the cyberbullying filters from students' home computers and onto school campuses, there's little the schools can do, said Christine Enyart, a project coordinator for the county Office of Education.

That office hasn't yet explored the possibility of creating a countywide policy regarding cyberbullying, she said, but this fall plans to arm district administrators, as well as parents, with more information about it.

"It needs to be a family issue, because I think a lot of this (Internet use) is starting at home," Enyart said. "We have to remember that the schools can't be responsible for all of this, that there needs to be a lot of discussion among family members to establish some ground rules for Internet, computer and cell phone use."

It's been a few months since the particular Web page that was directed at the Arroyo Grande High teen was removed.

But his mother, Michelle, occasionally still checks the now-familiar Web site for any trace of her son's name.

"I still check them to make sure no groups come up again," she said. "It takes up a little bit of my time, but I'm still doing a little bit of follow-up."

She also urges her son to tell her what happened at school, what people say to him in Arroyo High's hallways.

"I understand what (he) is feeling," Michelle said. "But I also don't know what's really going on inside, because how am I to know? ... All I can do is be there."

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